

Wealth of Information

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Words are fascinating. Avid readers have always found words that are delightful to roll off the tongue or that sit there oddly arrayed on the pages. One of the most delightful groups of words are the collective names of animals. Many of these collective names date from about 1450 while others are more modern.

There are no rules about these collective nouns. Some phrases make good sense if the animal's habitat is known; others can be understood only if their origins are traced in the dictionary; and still others continue to puzzle scholars. However these collective nouns came into our language, they can be classified into four groups; appearance, characteristic, habitat, and onomatopoeia.

The collective name may describe the appearance of the animal. For example, we say a "pride of lions" for a group of lions because of the lion's regal bearing. The name may also describe a distinctive behavior, like a "leap (leap) of leopards" because it describes how a leopard jumps on its prey. Where or how animals live is another way of creating collective names. For example, a "rookery of penguins" describes the place where penguins nest in the Antarctic. Finally, the sound of the collective name can describe an aspect of the animal's behavior, such as a "gaggle of geese" where "gaggle" sounds like the noise that geese make.

The following collective nouns have been used in ancient or modern times:

a colony of ants
a congress of baboons
a shoal of bass
a drove of cattle
a clowder of cats
a murder of crows
a troop of kangaroos
an exaltation of larks
a pride of lions
a richness of martens

a watch of nightingales

a parliament of owls

an ostentation of peacocks

a piteousness of doves

a convocation of eagles

a cast of falcons

a skulk of foxes

a gaggle of geese

a covey of grouse

a prickle of hedgehogs

a string of ponies

a bevy of quail

a conspiracy of ravens

a crash of rhinos

a dray of squirrels

a murmuration of starlings

a knot of toads

a pitying of turtledoves

a nest of vipers

a sneak of weasels

a gam of whales

Bear down on someone—to put pressure on someone or something
She was so late with the report. I will have to bear down on her.

Curiosity killed the cat—a proverb meaning that it is dangerous to be too curious
You'll get in trouble if you open his envelope. Curiosity killed the cat.

Be a dead duck—to have failed; to be finished
I forgot to lock the car doors. I will be a dead duck when I return to my car this afternoon.

Every dog has its day—everyone will get a chance
During tennis try-outs, the coach said, "Every dog has its day, so please be patient and wait your turn."

Rain cats and dogs—to rain very hard
It was raining cats and dogs when we returned to work on Monday.

Rat on someone—to report someone's bad behavior; to tattletale on someone
I'm sure Bob will rat on me for skipping class.

Separate the sheep from the goats—to divide people into two groups
The coach said the difficulty of the exercise would separate the sheep from the goats, and determine who was good enough to make the team.

Shed crocodile tears—to shed false tears; to pretend that one is sorry
I shed crocodile tears when I found out class was cancelled.

Snake in the grass—a low and deceitful person
She is a snake in the grass. She told everyone about Samantha's new boyfriend.

As smart as a fox—very clever
My niece is as smart as a fox. She figured out how to stay at home and still get credit for class.

No spring chicken—not young
My aunt will be 90 years old this year. She is no spring chicken.

As stubborn as a mule—very stubborn
My father will not turn on the air conditioner. He can be as stubborn as a mule.

You can't teach an old dog new tricks—old or experienced people cannot (or will not) learn new ways to do something
My grandfather should do his work on the computer, but you can't teach an old dog new tricks.

Have a whale of a time—to have an exciting time
While on the cruise, we had a whale of a time.

For chicken feed—for nearly nothing, to work for very little
Most labor jobs pay nothing but chicken feed.

Straight from the horse's mouth—from the original or a trustworthy source

We could not believe what came straight from the horse's mouth. The boss confirmed the rumor that we had the rest of the day off.

Cry wolf—to raise a false claim when there is no true threat

She keeps saying people are stealing her homework, but she's just crying wolf.

Chicken out—to lose one's courage and avoid doing something because one is afraid

I chicken out when I get up to home plate to hit the ball.

Wild-goose chase—an absurd or hopeless search for something nonexistent or unobtainable

I searched for the document, but it was a wild-goose chase. I had forgotten to save the latest updated version.

Packed in like sardines—many people (or things) being enclosed in a small space, like a can (tin) of sardines

This morning we were packed in like sardines on the subway.